
FORUM Dialog und Mission

Building Peace through Interreligious Dialogue: The Bishops-Ulama Conference in the Philippines

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The Bishops-Ulama Conference (earlier called a Forum) was formed in November 1996 in the Philippines. It brings together religious leaders of Muslim and Christian communities from all over Mindanao, the second largest island in the Philippines. It includes bishops of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, members of the Ulama League of the Philippines, and bishops of the National Council of Churches of the Philippines.

At present, the BUC's convenors, representing the three religious groupings are Archbishop Fernando Capalla, past Chairman of the CBCP Episcopal Commission on Inter-religious Dialogue; Dr. Salipada Tamayo, representing the ULP; and Bishop Hilario Gomez, Jr., of the NCCP.

From its inception, the BUC has focused on the spiritual bases for peace from both Muslim and Christian religious traditions, grounded in the belief in one God, a common origin and a common destiny for all. Even as the government and warring groups pursue a »genuine, comprehensive, and lasting peace« through political treaties and socio-economic development, the bishops and ulama focus on »the missing component in many failed peace efforts – an

affirmation of the convergent spiritual and cultural bases for peace.«

Thus, as an organization of religious leaders, the BUC has as its principal objective the authentic understanding of the Christian and Islamic faiths which teach common moral and spiritual values that are considered essential elements of justice and peace for the full development of society. Underpinning all these is the value of respectful and friendly dialogue which, despite many obstacles, is the only human and lasting way of arriving at conflict resolution.

1 Dialogue meetings

Over the past seventeen years, the BUC has held 42 dialogue meetings on a quarterly or semi-annual basis in various cities in Mindanao. These inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogues have been carried out in an atmosphere of openness, mutual respect, and growing familiarity among participants and their representatives. Normally the dialogues bring together 40-60 participants representing the three religious bodies. In-between the larger meetings, a Tripartite Commission composed of three to four members from each of the religious bodies meets to prepare the agenda for future gatherings.

At one time or another, the dialogue meetings have touched on two general areas. The first area covers the spiritual dimensions of dialogue – such as the bases for peace from the Bible and the Koran; the special place of Mary and Maryam in both scriptural accounts; and the goals of conflict resolution.

The second area covers current concerns arising from the ongoing peace process. These include various crisis points – such as the kidnappings of Msgr. Desmond Hartford, MSSC, in 1997; Fr. Luciano Benedetti, PIME, in 1998; and Fr. Giuseppe Pierantoni, SCJ, in October 2001-April 2002; and Fr. Giancarlo Bossi, PIME, in June 2007. In addition,

there were also the killings of Bishop Ben de Jesus, OMI, in front of his cathedral in Jolo in February 1997; Fr. Rhoel Gallardo, CMF, in Basilan in May 2000; Fr. Benjamin Inocencio, OMI, in Sulu in December 2000; and Fr. Rufus Halley, MSSC, in Lanao del Sur in August 2001. The most recent have been the killings of Fr. Rey Roda, OMI, in Tawi-tawi in 2008 and of Fr. Pops Tentorio, PIME, in Maguindanao in 2010.

2 War and the peace process

Going beyond individual incidents, there were major events affecting the peace process – in particular, the declaration of all-out war against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front by President Joseph Estrada in April-July 2000. This resulted in major dislocations of predominantly Muslim communities in central Mindanao. The atmosphere for peace talks was further clouded during the same period by the notorious kidnappings of foreign and local persons by the Abu Sayyaf, an extremist bandit group operating mostly on the chain of islands stretching from Basilan to Tawi-Tawi in the southernmost part of the Philippines. Elements of the Abu Sayyaf were pursued by the military after they killed two of their last three hostages, an American Christian missionary and a Filipina nurse.

In 2002, widespread violence erupted once more in Central Mindanao under the administration of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Thousands of internally displaced persons, fleeing the fighting between government forces and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, sought shelter in evacuation centers.

The most recent outbreak of violence took place in August 2008 over the abrupt cancellation of the Memo of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) between the government and MILF panels. Armed conflict erupted in Lanao del Norte and Central Mindanao, again displacing many Muslim and Christian communities.

It is perhaps during periods of open conflict and violence that the Bishops-Ulama Conference has played its key role – by providing a neutral forum where joint statements against violence have had a moderating effect. The BUC has also stressed that the conflict cannot be viewed as a religious war; that acts of extremist groups like the Abu Sayyaf are »un-Islamic;« and that both Muslim and Christian communities can help bring about a culture of peace.

3 Peace advocates

Since 1999, the Bishops-Ulama Conference has sponsored a yearly Mindanao Week of Peace – starting on the last Thursday of November and ending on the first Wednesday of December. For Christians, this covers the first Sunday of Advent, a special season of prayer. For Muslims, this may also coincide with the Holy season of Ramadhan. The week of peace has been able to generate widespread support among the youth, Christians and Muslims alike, as well as various sectors in different communities throughout Mindanao. It has confirmed the conviction that the vast majority of Mindanaoans are for peace.

Listed below are the various themes selected each year for the Mindanao Week of Peace:

- 1999 Healing the Past, Building the Future
- 2000 Mindanaoans Together Towards a Culture of Peace
- 2001 Peace: Sharing the Vision of Hope and Unity
- 2002 Peace Through Reconciliation: Mindanaoans Seeking a Common Ground
- 2003 Healing Through Forgiveness: Key to Total Human Development
- 2004 A Reconciled Family, Agent of Reconciliation
- 2005 Millennium Development Goals: Women and Children as Partners in Peace Building

- 2006 In the Name of the Almighty, God of Harmony, Care for the Earth
- 2007 Building Bridges of Peace with our Peace Officers
- 2008 Integrity of Heart and Mind, Way to Reconciliation and Peace
- 2009 Think Mindanao, Feel Mindanao, Bring Peace to Mindanao
- 2010 Responsive and Responsible Governance: Key to Peace, Development and Sustainability
- 2011 Common Word Between Us and You: Love of God, Love of Neighbor
- 2012 Love of God and Love of Neighbor – a Challenge for Mindanao
- 2013 Dialogue and Hope our Key to Peace

In addition to the Mindanao-wide dialogues, bishops and ulama have also engaged in sub-regional inter-faith meetings – in the cities of Zamboanga, Cotabato, Davao, Cagayan de Oro, Marawi, Pagadian, etc. In these localized gatherings, religious leaders – including pastors, priests, and imams, as well as leaders of the indigenous people communities – are able to address local issues more readily.

Among the significant milestones during the 17 years of existence of the BUC are the following:

1 The annual celebration of the Mindanao Week of Peace involving religious, civic, and government sectors. The number of peace groups and initiatives has been increasing over the years.

2 The Tripartite Youth Camp, held every two years during the first decade of the BUC. This gathered 200 to 300 Muslim, Christian and Indigenous People youths for a five-day camp experience, resulting in inter-cultural friendships among youth leaders from various parts of Mindanao.

3 A BUC Assembly that included for the first time wives and children of the Protestant bishops and Muslim ulama as well as Focolare participants. Three days were spent in discussing how the families could support the peace activities of the conference.

4 A significant symposium on Maryam in the Qur'an and Mary in the Bible, as explained by a Muslim and a Catholic theologian. Both groups manifested a meaningful consensus on the exalted position of the mother of Jesus Christ or Isa, the Prophet, in both sacred scriptures and her role as our Mother of Peace. This was held in Cagayan de Oro on August 29, 2001, during the 16th BUC general assembly.

5 The historic gathering of the First Asian Bishops-Ulama Conference on August 18-21, 2003, in Manila. This was attended by 121 Christian and Muslim religious leaders from 19 countries in Asia. They discussed the theme, »Seeking Peace and Development through an Authentic Christian and Muslim Dialogue of Life in Asia.« One of the main resolutions was to extend the experience of the BUC to other Asian countries.

6 A focus by the 28th General Assembly on the theme, »Women and Youth: Partners in Peacebuilding.« For the first time the BUC participants dwelt on doctrinal issues and arrived surprisingly at a consensus on important teachings of both Christianity and Islam. This consensus was facilitated by the atmosphere of trust that had been established among the members of the Conference.

7 The holding of the Indonesia-Mindanao Bishops-Ulama Network (IMBUM) on August 15-16, 2005, in Gen. Santos City. From Indonesia, three ulama, three Catholic bishops and two Protestant leaders responded to the BUC invitation to share our dialogue experience. Areas of collaboration between the two countries were explored.

8 A Peace Consultation on October 9-10, 2006, in Davao. At the request of the

9 Moro Islamic Liberation Front's Peace Panel, the BUC Convenors invited key Mindanao leaders to this consultation. The purpose was to bring back to the negotiating table the two panels to resume the peace talks that had been stalled on the issue of ancestral domain.

10 A Forum for Peace in September 2007 among participants coming from the BUC, Armed Forces of the Philippines and Philippine National Police. This highlighted the role of the military in peacebuilding efforts, particularly in the promotion of human rights.

11 A Multi-Sectoral and Cross-Regional Community Consultation on the Mindanao Peace Process in 2009-2010. This Mindanao-wide project was sponsored by the BUC after the collapse of the Memo of Agreement on Ancestral Domain in August 2008. The outcome of the consultations, called Konsult Mindanao, were summarized in six platforms for Peace in Mindanao: Sincerity, Security, Sensitivity, Solidarity, Spirituality, and Sustainability. In a joint statement on Oct. 14, 2012, several bishops of Mindanao referred to these six S's as their continuing tasks in supporting with »vigilant optimism« the recently-signed Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro.

12 A visit by a BUC delegation, comprising bishops, ulama, and government officials, to Islamabad in January 2010. Upon invitation of the Pakistani government, the BUC delegates were asked to share their inter-faith experience with their counterparts in Pakistan. The context for inter-religious dialogue here was reversed with a majority Muslim population aspiring to reach out to minority religious and ethnic communities.

4 Prospects

Recognizing the value of inter-religious dialogue and the crucial role of religious leaders in situations of conflict, the Philippine government in past years has provided logistical support to the BUC through the Office of the Presidential Assistant for the Peace Process. The BUC also receives support from other donor groups and from various sectors including the academe and media. In this